

Under a clear blue sky on a red clay lot off Bass Road, the U.S. Army surgeon general joined local military and community leaders Friday to break ground on the new Martin Army Community Hospital.

At a cost of \$350 million, the 70-bed facility at Fort Benning is expected to be completed by January 2014 and accept its first patients by September 2014. It will replace the 53-year-old hospital on Marne Road, one of the oldest in the Army.

It is a wonderful building and reaching the age where the electronics, water pipes and all that is breaking down and we have no replacement parts for it," said Koji Nishimura, commander of Martin Army Community Hospital. "What we are hoping to do with a new hospital is create a wonderful facility that not only meets today's needs, but tomorrow's needs."

Ground breaking was delayed on the project until a judge ruled on protests against the \$333 million contract the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers awarded to Turner Construction Company of Huntsville, Ala., and its design partner, Ellerbe Becket of New York.

U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop Jr., D-Columbus, said the challenges over the bid are over, although the court action delayed the ground breaking that could have been held in September.

It's going forward," Bishop said of the project. "That is why we are breaking ground."

Getting the project under way is good news for Turner Construction and for the area.

We should have broken ground last September," Bishop said.

Marty Miller, project executive for Turner Universal, said the company has cleared about 57 acres, work has started on the ramp off Interstate 185 and connecting Bass to Marne Road.

Foundation work should start in September.

Miller said the company will build the hospital on deadline because some work will be prefabricated in a factory using 3D modeling and fabrication.

The project will also boost temporary employment in the area, Miller said. The company has formed a coalition with the Georgia Department of Labor and some local councils to offer employment to all subcontractors.

Lt. Gen. Eric Schoomaker, the Army's surgeon general, said the private hospitals are replaced in 20 to 25 years.

We are just so blessed to have taxpayers of the United States and Congress of the United States in re-energizing of our health care and into the future," he said.

Schoomaker said he and Bishop had discussions earlier about possibly establishing a center on the site to serve veterans.

We had discussions about the ongoing progress between the Veterans Administration and the medical leadership about how we can work closely together to serve veterans and the entire Columbus community," Schoomaker said.

With the veteran population growing, Schoolmaker noted the cost of moving veterans from the area for treatment.

We are only in the possible phase now," he said.

Mike Gaymon, president of the Greater Columbus Chamber of Commerce, said you couldn't

over emphasize what the hospital will mean to the area.

The oldest hospital in the Army, to get rid of it is going to be great," Gaymon said. "Then you look at what this means to the future of our region, jobs, tax dollars for purchases of materials. Lots of folks will be gainfully employed for quite sometime. A lot of folks in the medical community hopefully will want to stay in our community."